development, including its form of government. Catholic social teaching tells us that the church does not advocate one style of governance over another. Each nation has the right to determine its own social, economic, and political structures without interference from any other nation, a point stated unambiguously in Justice in the World: “[A]ll peoples should be able to become the principal architects of their own economic and social development” (71). Each nation must choose its own course in promoting the common good. Ideally, that path will allow for the largest possible number of citizens to be involved in the governance process. The right of participation applies to all areas of life.

Discussion

1. To what extent does our society reflect or not reflect Catholic social teaching on the common good?

2. What is your understanding of the role of government? How does that understanding compare with Catholic teaching?

3. What do you consider the greatest threats to families?

4. What does this statement say to you: “People have a right to be involved in decision making processes that affect their lives”?

Actions

1. Carefully read a newspaper over the next week looking for an example of where someone’s economic interests have come into conflict with the larger community.

2. Talk with someone whose volunteering efforts have led her to become more politically active. What motivates her? What challenges has she faced?

3. Check with your parish to see if any form of education for justice is happening. Can you identify any use of Catholic social teachings?

Joanne is grateful for the good health of her family members. She is also aware that one serious medical problem will bring a major financial setback. Joanne, along with her husband Bill and their three children, are among the forty-five million citizens of the United States without health insurance. Bill is a full-time chef whose restaurant offers no employee benefits. Joanne works for a local hospital which keeps her weekly hours just below the level at which benefits become mandatory. They keep their doctor and dental visits to a minimum, sometimes delaying a visit during illness, always fearful this may lead to more serious medical problems. Joanne and Bill are both hard workers and sometimes one will take a second job when finances are particularly tight. They do what they can to get by in a society that praises family values but doesn’t regard such needs as health care, housing, and adequate employment as basic rights.

A discussion of rights and responsibilities can go in many different directions. In the United States today there is much discussion about personal responsibility. Often that conversation represents an argument to reduce the level of government involvement in social services, leaving people like Joanne with little hope for some kind of health insurance coverage. At the same time we hear a lot about individual rights. Television commercials incessantly remind us of all the good things in life that we should have. People drive high fuel-consumption cars and trucks...
and noisy recreational vehicles with little concern for their impact on others in the community. The guiding norm seems to be: if I can afford it, I have a right to it.

These cultural factors add to the difficulty of understanding what Catholic social teaching has to say about rights and responsibilities. Two quick introductory points need to be made. First, Catholic teaching is at its best when it considers rights and responsibilities together. We cannot appreciate either except in relationship to the other. Each acts as a qualifier on the other. To speak only of rights—as happens so often in our society—is to ignore how these rights are limited by responsibilities to others. To focus only on personal responsibility risks overlooking or even denying the rights to which every person may lay claim.

A second point about rights and responsibilities in Catholic social teaching is that they exist within a social context. As humans live and grow within various forms of communities, so their rights and responsibilities take on meaning within this social environment as well. It is within community—within society—that we best appreciate the expectations that flow from human rights and human responsibilities.

Rights and Human Dignity

From a Catholic perspective any discussion of human rights begins with human dignity, the foundation of all rights. Every person enjoys a sacred dignity bestowed by the Creator. This dignity of human persons is grounded in the belief that all of us are created by God, redeemed by Christ, and called to communion with God. Within creation humans enjoy a special relationship with God. Made in God’s image, our life’s vocation is to respond to God’s call.

The dignity of the human person and the resultant sacredness of human life provide the foundation for the most basic of all human rights: the right to life. Catholic moral theology recognizes that each and every life is a gift from God. All of us are dependent upon God for our very existence. From that perspective the right to life is a qualified right in the sense that no one has a right to life beyond what the Creator may have intended. At the same time the affirmation of the sacredness of human life and the right to life that every human enjoys is a claim directed towards every other human being. This claim asserts that no one may end the life of another human person except to defend one’s own life and the lives for whom one is responsible. Catholic social teaching claims that everyone has the fundamental right to life.

The right to life means more than the right to be born. In Catholic teaching this right begins at conception and ends at natural death. Central to this teaching is the claim that every person also has a right to those conditions necessary for living a decent life. Faithful Citizenship summarizes these rights as “faith and family life, food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing” (14). It is never enough to defend a person’s right to be born without also supporting whatever is needed to live that life with dignity. Peace on Earth in 1961 became the first social encyclical to discuss in great detail the right to life’s basic necessities.

Beginning our discussion of the rights of man, we see that every man has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services. Therefore a human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, or in any other case in which he is deprived of the means of subsistence through no fault of his own. (11)

Catholic social teaching regards these human rights as essential for the safeguarding of human dignity. To deny a person any one of these rights (such as food, shelter, or health care) is to make it more difficult for such a person to realize her dignity and to be as fully responsible for herself and others as she is called to be. Joanne and Bill are doing everything they can to be good parents and good citizens. Their lack of health insurance, and the potentially serious problem this represents, endangers the long-term health of their family members as well as their ability to contribute to the larger community, all a way of realizing human dignity. Catholic teaching sees these fundamental rights as “the minimum conditions for life in community” (Economic Justice for All, 17). The teaching also notes that these rights are universal. A person living in Asia, Africa, or Latin America has the same right to these basic necessities of life as does someone living in the United States. Whether these rights are protected in any society becomes a primary criterion for evaluating the just workings of that society’s institutions.

In recent decades Catholic social teaching has introduced two new accents into the discussion of human rights that relate to the protection of human dignity. In the United States the Catholic bishops speak of economic and social rights in the same conversation as civil and political
rights (Economic Justice for All, 80). It is not enough to grant people the right to vote or to be free of discrimination. The protection of human rights includes ensuring all citizens the right to employment or income so they may obtain the goods essential for a dignified life such as food, health care, or housing. The bishops note the parallels between today’s economic challenges and the political challenge faced by the founders of this nation:

In order to create a new form of political democracy they were compelled to develop ways of thinking and political institutions that had never existed before. Their efforts were arduous and their goals imperfectly realized, but they launched an experiment in the protection of civil and political rights that has prospered through the efforts of those who came after them. We believe the time has come for a similar experiment in securing economic rights: the creation of an order that guarantees the minimum conditions of human dignity in the economic sphere for every person. (95)

A second emphasis in more recent social documents is that placed on the right of participation. As noted in the previous chapter, everyone has the right to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Increasingly this right to participate is recognized as the guarantor of many other rights.

Rights and Healthy Communities

This Catholic support of human rights should not be confused with a Western cultural reverence for individual rights outside a framework of social responsibility. While Catholic teaching does promote personal rights, it balances these rights with mutual responsibilities and a concern for the well-being of the larger society. For this reason human rights are seen as the foundation of social harmony as well as international peace. We cannot have healthy communities and a peaceful society if human dignity is not respected and rights are not protected. The strife and turmoil that results from the abuse of human rights contradict any notion of harmonious relationships either within nations or across borders. Pope Paul VI warned of this connection between denial of rights and social unrest when he wrote how the poor were becoming aware of their undeserved hardship: “the temptation becomes stronger to risk being swept away toward types of messianism which give promises but create illu-

sions. The resulting dangers are patent: violent popular reactions, agitation toward insurrection, and a drifting toward totalitarian ideologies” (On the Development of Peoples, 11).

John XXIII had stated this point in more positive language when he pointed out that maintaining personal rights and duties is the principal way of guaranteeing the common good. Heads of state, then, and all civil authorities must endeavor to respect, protect, and coordinate these rights. In this way it is possible for everyone in society not simply to claim their rights, but to balance the exercise of their rights against the needs of the broader community. In this way each person carries out his or her duties and makes the necessary contribution to the common good (Peace on Earth, 60).

Protecting human rights is necessary for the integral development of every person within society. No one can easily grow in moral responsibility, direct their lives, and contribute to society if they must worry about whether they will eat today or where they might be sleeping tonight. One’s living conditions must allow a person to become conscious of his dignity and to exercise the needed freedom and responsibility of a person made in the image and likeness of God (The Church in the Modern World, 31). These fundamental personal rights—civil, political, social, and economic—are necessary for human dignity.

Respect for these rights contributes to the development of both individuals and society. Denial of any one of these rights, such as health care or education or participation, harms not only the individuals directly affected, but the larger community as a whole, causing tensions and divisions and weakening the solidarity among citizens (Economic Justice for All, 80). Denial of such rights also may result in practical, costly consequences to society. Joanne and Bill sometimes delay seeking medical help for themselves or one of their children because they can’t afford a visit to the doctor. This delay may lead to more costly medical procedures that the city or county will have to pay for in the future.

There is an important relationship between respecting individual rights and building healthy communities. We see this also in the church’s teaching on intermediate associations, those many voluntary groups and organizations that stand between individuals and the government. Every person has a right to belong to such organizations of their choice—churches, book clubs, organized charities. By exercising our right to join such groups we contribute something to the community as a whole. Catholic social teaching first developed this connection between the exercise of individual rights and the building of community in its writings.
on workers' rights to join unions and participate in decision making within the enterprise. This kind of association and participation becomes a training ground for responsible involvement in the larger society. For this reason Economic Justice for All reminds us that labor unions and other intermediate organizations "are an indispensable element of social life" (104).

A basic Catholic teaching on human rights is that they cannot be denied or taken away. These rights come with being human, granted by God, unable to be extinguished by other humans. This is the meaning of John XXIII's assertion: "Indeed, precisely because one is a person one has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from one's very nature. And as these rights and obligations are universal and inviolable, so they cannot in any way be surrendered" (Peace on Earth, 9). This is part of the rationale behind the church's opposition to the death penalty. Regardless of what a person has done and in spite of having committed a terrible crime against other humans, a criminal never relinquishes his God-given sacred dignity and right to life. The only justifiable reason for using the death penalty against such a person would be to protect citizens, something which today can be accomplished short of the death penalty.

Finally, in the interplay between personal rights and building healthy communities there is a place for persons to decide not to exercise certain personal rights because of the needs of the larger society. An example might be a person choosing not to purchase a vehicle with poor gas mileage because society needs to conserve energy. This is a way of contributing to the common good. It is also recognizing the possibility of rights being in conflict. Paul VI had this in mind when he used the now famous phrase "preferential respect due the poor." "The more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others" (A Call to Action, 23).

Responsibilities

A discussion of human rights is incomplete if it does not address responsibilities. The realization of human dignity is not possible if we focus only upon the claims each of us can make upon one another and upon society. A Catholic understanding of human dignity includes the central notion that persons are responsible for the direction of their lives.

Each of us has the ability and duty to direct our lives towards the end intended by the Creator. While that end may not always be clear to us, we are able to recognize good choices in our lives—choices that are good for us, good for our neighbors, and good for the larger society. Human dignity requires that each of us has what we need to live a reasonably decent life. Human dignity also requires each of us to take responsibility for our lives, for the well-being of our neighbors, and for the common good.

Build community

This balance between rights and responsibilities is necessary for the proper development of individual persons and of society.

Those, therefore, who claim their own rights, yet altogether forget or neglect to carry out their respective duties, are people who build with one hand and destroy with the other. Since men are social by nature they are meant to live with others and to work for one another's welfare. (Peace on Earth, 30-31)

One of our greatest responsibilities is to help build healthy communities—local, state, and national. That effort is made difficult if we are overly concerned about our own rights. Certainly, we must attend to what we need for our own growth as morally responsible persons. Daily physical, material needs are part of that. John XXIII reminded us of this when he wrote that "he who possesses certain rights has likewise the duty to claim those rights as marks of his dignity" (Peace on Earth, 44). Nonetheless, one of our more serious responsibilities is to balance the claims we make—even rightful claims—with the needs of the broader community. Those needs include respecting the rights of others. They also include foregoing some things to which we may have a rightful claim but which may detract from the strength and well-being of society.

Defending rights

One final consideration of our responsibilities is in the area of defending specific rights that come under attack. In addition to looking out for the well-being and healthy development of society, we also have a duty to stand up in defense of human rights. This may take the form of speaking up for the right of immigrants to receive social services in our state or county. It may involve standing with minorities experiencing discrimination in a local university. This defense of specific human rights can be an effective witness to what Catholic social teaching says about
human dignity, rights, and responsibilities. This teaching warns that it is not enough to respect dignity and rights in the abstract. That respect is of little value if it does not find expression in the practical world of daily living. We must not only respect human rights, but secure and defend them (Faithful Citizenship, 14). Again, the social document that launched the church’s modern discussion of human rights underscores this point. “It is not enough, for example, to acknowledge and respect every man’s right to the means of subsistence if we do not strive to the best of our ability for a sufficient supply of what is necessary for his sustenance” (Peace on Earth, 32).

Rights Under Threat

In our world today the opportunity to defend human rights and dignity is always present. It is difficult to imagine a time in history when there were more unnecessary and avoidable threats against that part of creation made in the image and likeness of God.

Life

None of these threats is more serious than the direct attacks against human life discussed in chapter 2. Abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment—these actions among others represent the most dramatic and direct threats to human rights and dignity because their aim is to end life. Even as the number of abortions in the United States is declining, the use of embryonic stem cell research is gaining support. The foreseeable future appears unlikely to be free of the different direct attacks against human life. Clear as that may be, these acts are not the only ways in which the dignity of the human person comes under attack. Along with the threat to life itself, we see many ways in which the possibility of living that life with dignity is threatened. These threats take different shape in different parts of the world, but all of them share one common effect. They diminish the chances of people to live their life to the fullest and to realize the sacred dignity their Creator has given them.

Life’s supports

Globally one of the greatest threats to people living a dignified life is the lack of safe and nutritious food. In the developed world new technologies for producing ever greater quantities of food are constantly emerg-
Still another threat to human dignity in the United States appears in the area of health care. The church has always recognized that decent health care—along with food and housing—should be available to all. This is a moral imperative for the protection of human dignity. In 2003 forty-five million Americans were without health insurance coverage, placing their access to needed medical services in jeopardy. Faithful Citizenship summarizes Catholic social teaching on this topic.

Affordable and accessible health care is an essential safeguard of human life, a fundamental human right, and an urgent national priority. We need to reform the nation's health care system, and this reform must be rooted in values that respect human dignity, protect human life, and meet the needs of the poor and uninsured. (3)

Joanne and Bill are just one example of millions of working American families whose well-being is daily compromised by our society's unwillingness to provide this human right, to provide some form of health insurance for every citizen.

In the area of labor we see two particular rights that are under increasing threat in the United States today. One is the denial of just compensation for labor. Millions of U.S. citizens today work full time yet remain below the poverty level because their wages are inadequate. A second threat to workers today relates to their right to organize, to form unions. Beginning with Pope Leo XIII's first social encyclical, On the Condition of Labor (1891), the church has repeatedly voiced its support for collective bargaining among workers. To deny this right is an attack upon human dignity itself. Yet in 1985 the U.S. Catholic bishops felt the need to restate their opposition to ongoing efforts to destroy existing unions and to prevent workers from organizing new ones (Economic Justice for All, 104).

There is one final area in which we see threats to basic human rights necessary for respecting human dignity. That is the area of immigration. The gospel calls us to love our neighbor and welcome the stranger, especially the neighbor who seeks a decent life by emigrating from her native country. This is a right long recognized in Catholic social teaching.

Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own country; and, when there are just reasons for it, the right to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there. (Peace on Earth, 25)

Today nations experience a heightened concern regarding terrorism, a phenomenon that leads to more restrictive immigration policies. Clearly nations have a right to promote their own security. Likewise, sovereign states have the right to control their borders, but this is not an absolute right. Already in 1952 Pope Pius XII wrote that authorities must seek a balance between the legitimate concerns of more affluent nations and the needs of immigrants (On the Spiritual Care to Migrants). More recently a joint pastoral letter from the Catholic bishops of Mexico and the United States reminds us that the right to immigrate is grounded in the principle that the goods of creation are meant to satisfy the needs of all peoples.

The Church recognizes that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right. (Strangers No Longer, 35)

Christians, as individuals and as local churches, must welcome immigrants and defend their right to basic necessities for a dignified life. These include livable wages, decent housing, health care, and education. In their pastoral statement, Welcoming the Stranger Among Us (2000), the U.S. Catholic bishops emphasize that all immigrants have a right to respectable living conditions, regardless of their legal status (11). In recent years various rights of immigrants have come under threat from new immigration legislation (1996) and from efforts in different states to restrict immigrant access to tax-supported education and health care.

A final point on this topic is to note that the most effective way to reduce immigration into any country is by addressing the causes that lead people to leave their own lands—by addressing "the political, social, and economic inequities that contribute to it" (Faithful Citizenship, 24). Pope John Paul II elaborated on this in a 2004 World Day of Migrants and Refugees statement when he stated that building conditions of peace must include protecting the right to live in peace and dignity in one's own country.

... it is possible for every country to guarantee its own population, in addition to freedom of expression and movement, the possibility to satisfy basic needs such as food, health care, work, housing and education; the frustration of these needs forces many into a position where their only option is to emigrate. (3)
We must support the needs and rights of immigrants in our country, especially those who choose to live in our local communities. At the same time we need to advocate for just economic and political relations between nations, for trade relations favorable to developing nations, and for generosity on the part of wealthy nations in foreign assistance. All of this addresses the basic needs of people before they decide to emigrate from their native lands. All of this respects the right of every person anywhere on the globe to live in peace and dignity in one's own country.

**Prioritizing rights**

The right to life and the right to whatever is needed to live that life with dignity cover a lot of ground. This topic presents a complex and sometimes confusing picture of needs that must be addressed if human dignity is to be respected. Some people today draw a divide between the right to life and all other human rights (food, health care, housing, etc.). In their thinking, the right to life—and this often means the right to be born—is the most important of all rights and should receive more of our attention than other rights. There is a certain theoretical logic in this position: if you don’t protect the right of a person to be born, why worry about meeting that person's need for food or health care? Confronting the abstract logic of this position are some very practical problems.

To prioritize rights in this manner is to make judgments about the relative value of human lives at different stages. The obvious questions follow. Is the life of an unborn person more valuable or more important than the life of a one-year-old child dying from starvation in the Sudan? Is that unborn life more valuable than that of a thirty-year-old woman in Detroit whose illness has reached a life-threatening stage because she did not have the money for medical treatment earlier when this disease could have been stopped? This is not to diminish the importance of the lives of the unborn, but to remind us that every human life is sacred, that every human life enjoys a dignity given by the Creator.

A further danger that comes with prioritizing rights in this way is the implied order of response. If the right to life of the unborn is the most important of human rights, then it would seem that our limited time, energy, and resources need to be directed toward the defense of those particular lives. The logical consequence of this position is that we don’t allow other human needs (food, housing, health care) to distract us or consume resources until the struggle to defend the right to life of the unborn has been won. Neither our moral theology nor our intuitive instincts support that kind of thinking.

Catholic social teaching tells us that every human life is sacred—in every part of the world, at every age and stage of development. The life of the one in the womb is sacred not because he or she is an innocent unborn person, but because he or she is a person created in the image and likeness of God—the same as a twenty-year-old man struggling with AIDS or the homeless single mother of two who spends her nights in an emergency shelter. Prioritizing human rights risks overlooking the universal character of human dignity and the right of every human to be born and to live their life until natural death with their basic needs met.

We must defend all human rights because all of them are necessary for the full development of every person. We defend them as well because a healthy society and harmonious relations among nations depend upon respect for life at every stage of its development. As individuals we are called to stand up for persons or groups whose rights are threatened. Our own lives are vocational responses to God’s call. Our effort to become whom we are called to be is not complete if we allow God’s image to be degraded in fellow human beings. The 1971 document Justice in the World tells us that part of the Christian’s response to Christ’s saving act is in our deeds of justice (56). Earlier in the document we read of the necessary connection between faith and justice.

Faith in Christ, the Son of God and the Redeemer, and love of neighbor constitute a fundamental theme of the writers of the New Testament. According to St. Paul, the whole of the Christian life is summed up in faith effecting that love and service of neighbor which involve the fulfillment of the demands of justice. (33)

The demands of justice require us to respond to any threat against the dignity and rights of human beings in our own nation or anywhere in the world. The opportunities for such responses are many. Our challenge is not to prioritize human rights but to recognize all of them as necessary, and to defend any right that comes under threat. Each of us has different gifts and skills to lend to that response. Each of us has different experiences and passions that will lead us to the defense of particular rights. The Spirit works through all of us, patiently.